

# The little lady who started the Civil War

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## CONNECTIONS



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Abraham Lincoln sardonically characterized Harriet Beecher Stowe as "the little lady who started the Civil War" after she wrote a unique novel that made slavery come alive to readers.

It was "Uncle Tom's Cabin," published in March 1852, in an edition of 5,000 sets of two volumes each, bound in cloth at \$1.50 per set. The first printing was sold out in two days, and 50,000 sets followed in the next eight weeks.

According to the "Boston Traveler," three power presses running 24 hours a day and 100 binders were unable to keep up with the demand for the book. By the end of 1852, 300,000 copies had been sold in the United States and 1.5 million copies in Great Britain and its colonies. Uncle Tom, with his Christlike qualities, represented all slaves, while Simon Legree worked blacks until they dropped, then replaced them. As no other abolitionist tract could, this book awakened feelings of repulsion for slavery across the nation and the world.

A New England Beecher, Harriet had been aroused to the immorality of slavery and received her first inspiration in church. She sat in a dreamlike state and had a vision of unusual intensity: two brutish slaves, urged on by a brutish white master, were flogging a white-haired old slave. The slave would not betray his fellows or his faith in Christ, and he prayed for his murderers as he died.

Harriet wrote this vision down, and when her son, Henry, read it, he said, "Oh, mamma! Slavery is the most cruel thing in the world!" Her husband Calvin encouraged her to build on this story because the "Lord intended it so."

It has been said that Harriet Beecher Stowe was the first American realist of any consequence, and the first to use fiction for a profound criticism of American society. When she became famous almost overnight, her brother Edward



Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of "Uncle Tom's Cabin," said the story was given to her in a vision.

cautioned her against pride and vanity. Her reaction was that he should not be troubled. "He doesn't know that I didn't write that book."

Mrs. John Howard, to whom Harriet was speaking, was shocked. "What! You did not write 'Uncle Tom'?"

"No," said Harriet. "I only put down what I saw."

"But," said Mrs. Howard, "You have never been at the South, have you?"

"No," said Harriet, "but it all came before me in visions, one after another, and I put them down in words."

Harriet sometimes said that "God had guided her pen" and that she had even been a "reluctant instrument" in writing the book. She seemed to

believe sincerely that she could not have written the book without God's help. She was, after all, a 40-year-old housewife who was passionately involved with her subject and was doing God's will.

"So you want to know something about what sort of woman I am! To begin with, then, I am a little bit of a woman — somewhat more than 40, about as thin and dry as a pinch of snuff; never very much to look at in my best days, and looking like a used-up article now."

Such self-disparagement tended to emphasize the contrast between her obscurity and her accomplishment. Although she was thought by most people to be a plain-appearing woman, she was also thought to have a spiritual quality and "large dark lustrous eyes."

It seemed that people all over the world took the book to heart. By the fall of 1852, "Tommania" had begun, with Americans signing or playing eight different Uncle Tom Songs. There were stage versions opening in New York, Boston and London, and they were popular. By the 1890s, 400 to 500 troupes were performing the play at various places. It was an ironic result, since Harriet considered the theater to be sinful and corrupting.

She was invited by anti-slavery societies in Europe to visit at their expense in 1853. She traveled to Glasgow, London, Paris, Geneva and Cologne, where she met cheering crowds. She wrote: "I could not help saying, 'What went ye out for to see? A reed shaken with the wind?'"

Of the welcome in England, she said: "What pleased me was that it was not mainly from the literary, nor the rich, nor the great, but the plain common people. The butcher came out of his stall and the baker from his shop, the miller dusty with flour, the blooming comely young mother, with that hearty, intelligent, friendly look as if they knew we should be glad to see them."

Although no writer has ever won such instant fame, "Uncle Tom's Cabin" fails to stand as a classic next to "The Scarlet Letter," "Moby

Dick" or "Huckleberry Finn." Harriet had made a plea for a cause, and once the cause was met and achieved by abolishing slavery, the book became a historical landmark. Its ultimate importance lay in the fact that people who never read novels read "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and reacted to it with moral indignation.





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